

# Utah's Conservation Plan for Greater Sage Grouse

## Common questions and answers

### **What is the plan?**

Utah's Conservation Plan for Greater Sage Grouse is a detailed, scientifically based plan that identifies how Utah will expand greater sage grouse habitat and populations. A detailed needs analysis has been completed which enables the state to focus conservation efforts where they will have the greatest impact towards the reduction of threats facing greater sage grouse while balancing the economic and social needs of Utah residents.

### **Why is the plan necessary?**

Greater sage grouse populations are declining across the western United States. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will make a decision in 2015 about whether to list the species as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Utah wants to prevent such a listing, which would have serious economic consequences. Utah is working proactively to conserve the species so that federal listing is unnecessary.

### **Who developed the plan?**

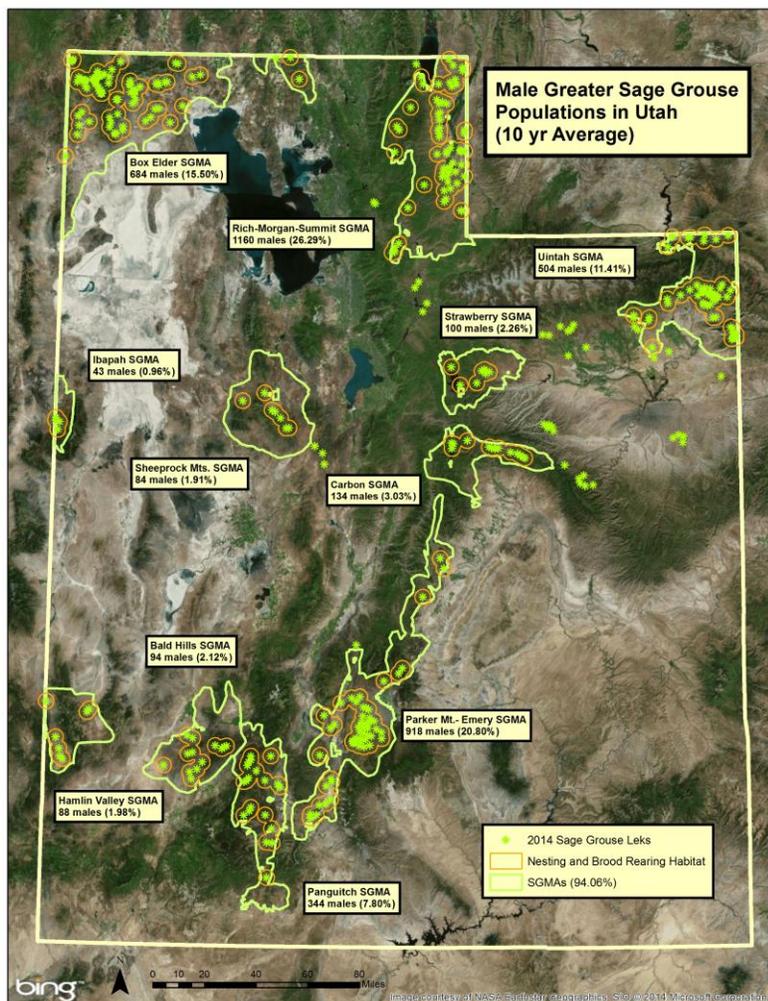
Governor Gary Herbert assembled a diverse group of stakeholders to share their recommendations for the plan. This advisory team, known as the Greater Sage-grouse Working Group, included representatives from state and federal agencies, county commissions, energy-development companies, agriculture interests, private landowners, wildlife advocates and other participating organizations. After the working group held open public meetings (February– October of 2012), its input was used to draft the plan.

### **How does the plan provide for the conservation of greater sage grouse in Utah?**

The goal of the plan is to protect, maintain, improve and enhance sage grouse populations and habitats within 11 established sage grouse management areas. To reach that goal, there are measurable objectives that focus on population, habitat and distribution. Utah is following the plan and meeting the objectives. Achieving these objectives has led to increased sage grouse habitat and is likely associated with the observed increases in sage grouse populations.

### Where are the sage grouse management areas?

The plan identifies 11 sage grouse management areas (SGMAs), which are located across the state. The SGMAs contain the necessary habitat for just over 94% percent of the greater sage grouse in Utah. The following map indicates the names and locations of the sage grouse management areas as well as the current 10-year rolling average number of males observed on leks as of the spring 2014 count.



### Where can I find the plan?

The entire plan is available at [wildlife.utah.gov/sage-grouse](http://wildlife.utah.gov/sage-grouse).

### Is Utah the only state with a plan?

No. All of the western states with populations of greater sage grouse are tackling this challenge. Some states have completed their conservation plans — or equivalent documents — while others are still drafting them.

**Are Gunnison sage grouse and greater sage grouse the same species?**

No, they are two different species. The Gunnison sage-grouse was recently listed by the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as a threatened species. This plan is designed to conserve greater sage-grouse. The USFWS is scheduled to make a listing determination by September of 2015 whether the species still merits the warranted but precluded status or whether to propose a threatened or endangered listing.

**How many greater sage grouse live in Utah?**

Utah is home to a small percentage of the total population of Greater Sage-grouse. Its home to somewhere in the range of 3%-8% of the greater sage grouse in the West. The state's population naturally fluctuates, depending on the year. Currently, biologists estimate a statewide population of 16,000 to 34,000 birds.

**Has Utah already taken steps to help greater sage grouse?**

Yes. Utah has been working to protect greater sage grouse for more than 15 years. Since 2006, Utah has spent over \$52 million dollars in state and federal funds to improve more than 568,000 acres of sage grouse habitat. Researchers have conducted dozens of studies on the grouse and their habitat. There are also 10 local working groups, under the direction of Utah State University, that focus on planning and conservation for specific sage grouse populations.

**What scientific information was used to prepare the plan?**

The plan includes the work of many researchers who have focused on the biology of greater sage grouse. Biologists at Utah State University, Brigham Young University and other institutions have conducted numerous studies over the years. The plan's appendices detail the vast amount of completed research on all of the following topics:

- Local conditions related to greater sage grouse
- The large number of projects that have improved habitat to date
- The effects of tall structures and grazing upon Utah's greater sage grouse

**Has the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considered the plan?**

After working closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to prepare the plan, Utah is confident the plan will meet their requirements and the conservation needs of Greater Sage-grouse. The USFWS is working with the state to ensure the plan's success.

**Will this plan prevent a listing under the Endangered Species Act?**

Not necessarily, but the plan includes sufficient scientific data and management provisions to justify a "not warranted" listing decision. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will make its final decision in 2015.

**What provisions are made for lands held by private landowners?**

The plan offers an incentive-based approach that will appeal to private landowners who want to contribute to the conservation of the species. The Natural Resources Conservation Service is willing to help fund this incentive program.

### **What are the major threats to Utah's greater sage grouse populations?**

The USFWS identified two major threats to Utah's greater sage grouse populations; habitat fragmentation and a lack of long-term legal or regulatory protections. Four of the Utah plan's five objectives focus on habitat protection, restoration and expansion.

Wildfire and invasive grasses are two of the greatest landscape threats contributing to habitat fragmentation in Utah. After an in-depth analysis of wildfire within Utah's SGMAs, this threat has been ameliorated through the creation of a wildfire priority management and restoration plan. Regulations are now in place which assure resource priorities are focused towards decreasing the impact of wildfire on sage-grouse habitat.

In addition to the regulations positively impacting wildfire reduction and restoration, Governor Herbert recently signed an Executive Order titled "Implementing the Utah Conservation Plan for Greater Sage-grouse", February 10, 2015. The order heightens regulatory certainty by requiring all state agencies to coordinate implementation of the Conservation Plan with the Public Lands Policy Coordination Office, Office of the Governor.

### **How much disturbance/development will be allowed in sage grouse management areas?**

The plan limits any new, permanent disturbance of the habitat within each sage grouse management area. If disturbance occurs, mitigation will be required at a 4:1 ratio. Mitigation will be coordinated through a statewide Mitigation Program. The plan's protocol for handling disturbance is simple:

1. Avoid disturbance if possible
2. Minimize disturbance if it is unavoidable
3. Mitigate disturbance through various projects

The above protocol will be offered to private landowners — and to the Utah Trust Lands Administration or local governments — through incentive-based programs.

### **Given the possibility of a listing, why are Utahns still allowed to hunt greater sage grouse?**

Utah continues to allow limited sage grouse hunting for many reasons:

- Like all upland game birds, sage grouse populations produce an annual surplus that can be removed by hunting without limiting the population. Hunting is limited to the four largest sage grouse populations in Utah. (There are more than 500 breeding adults in each of the hunted populations.)
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not consider limited hunting to be an important threat to the continued survival of sage grouse. During a USFWS review in 2004, an expert panel ranked hunting 17th on a prioritized list of 19 potential threats to the species. The top four threats are related to habitat loss.
- Hunting is tightly restricted. In the late 1970s (when habitat and populations were plentiful), Utah hunters harvested an estimated 24,000 sage grouse per year. Now, the annual harvest in the four open areas is around 1,000 birds total.

- Hunters' license and permit fees—along with matching federal funds—pay for most sage grouse research and management in Utah. Revenue from hunters is not used to fund management of non-hunted species in Utah.

**What will happen to any sage grouse that live outside of the sage grouse management areas?**

Those sage grouse will not fall under the management activities or restrictions identified in the plan. The 11 sage grouse management areas will be the focus of this conservation effort.

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